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## **Jeff Sessions Brings Back the War On Drugs**

**Jiuyuan Chi**

In 2013, the former attorney general Eric Holder issued a memo, excluding non-violent drug crime offenders from harsh sentencing. Four years later, the new attorney general Jeff Sessions reversed the memo and directed federal prosecutors to impose sentences to seek the strongest charges possible. The Obama era reforms were supported by Democrats and Republicans alike, hoping to reduce the massive incarcerated population and end the tough-on-crime era. Jeff Sessions' instruction reversed all the previous efforts. His reform of the criminal justice system brings back the war on drugs, hurts social justice, and fuels already heightened racial tensions.

First and foremost, we have to understand why Jeff Sessions brought up the war on drugs at this particular point. He reasoned that crime rates in 2015 increased from the previous year and blamed this increase on the loose policies directed by Eric Holder, the former Attorney General. Jeff Sessions claimed that he saw a "dangerous trend" in rising crime rates, referring to the 7.8 percent increase in murder rate from 2014 to 2015. Holder's policies required federal prosecutors to reserve the most extreme penalties for serious violent crime offenders and gave discretion to prosecutors so that they could spare low level non-violent criminal offenses of unnecessary minimum mandatory years. Although Sessions was correct about the small rise in violent crimes from the previous year, overall crime rates were at their lowest level in 40 years. Under Holder's years in office, violent crime rates of 2015 were only 1/4 the rates of 1993. Nevertheless, if Sessions was right, we would see a nationwide crime increase. The truth does not square with this assumption. The Brennan Center noted that this increase was highly concentrated to cities like Baltimore, Chicago, and Washington, D.C.

Jeff Sessions sent a clear message that he wanted a war on drugs. With already heightened racial tension, there is nothing that this nation needs less than a war on drug at this point. Jeff Sessions didn't invent the war on drugs as it originated in the 1970s. Though it has been proven several times in history as a failed and harmful strategy, Sessions still attempted to bring back the war on drugs. It did make sense in 1971 when President Nixon declared the war on drugs when there was a need for the country to regulate drug issues. According to a Gallup poll conducted in 1969, 48% of the Americans surveyed believed that drug was a serious social issue that needed to be addressed. However, even under such circumstances, Nixon's move was criticized by many as "with ulterior motives." John Ehrlichman, domestic policy chief of President Nixon, shared insider information during a survey in 1994. He said that black people were an enemy threatening the Nixon campaign, and Nixon was advocating drug reform in the hope that these policies would help secure his job. Knowing that it would be illegal to start a war on black people, Nixon first associated the black with heroin, and then criminalized drugs heavily.

Nixon wasn't the only president in history that led critics to question whether racism played a role in his advocating for drug policy reforms. In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan refocused on drug issues and pushed incarceration to a new level. During his administration, incarceration for non-violent drug related crimes roses significantly from 50,000 in 1980 to over 400,000 by 1997. In 1986, Congress passed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, which was widely

criticized as being racist and unfairly targeted people of color. The law imposed harsher sentences for crack cocaine offenses than for powder offenses. It established a 100:1 sentencing disparity for crack cocaine in comparison to powder cocaine. The vast majority of times, crack cocaine offenders were African Americans while the majority of powder offenders tended to be white people. The history of anti-drug policies exposed the racist nature of the war on drugs. Jeff Sessions' move today could be following the tracks of an overthrown chariot.

There is no way for us to know whether or not Jeff Sessions, the Senator from Alabama, has similar "ulterior motives." What we do know is that the immediate effect of his instructions will be mass incarceration that targets the minorities unfairly. As Professor Michelle Alexander writes in her book "The New Jim Crow," today nearly one-third of black men are likely to be put behind bars at some point in their lives. She notes in her book that while white people committed more drug related crimes, African Americans or Hispanic Americans are the ones taking more of the prison time. White students were found to use cocaine at a rate seven times higher than black people. At the same time, black people are three times more likely than whites to be arrested for drug possession. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, of the 225,242 people incarcerated for drug offenses in 2011, 45 percent were blacks, while whites counted for only 30 percent.

In addition to racial issues, Sessions' memo has negative impacts on the construction of the criminal justice system as a whole, not just on individual offenders. It destroys the original purpose of having a criminal justice system to correct the wrongdoings and restore justice. One way to put this is to think of social justice as a vertical line. Every time someone conducts a wrongdoing, he or she drives the social justice off track. The point of having a criminal justice system is to measure the severity of the crime and punish the criminals by the exact same amount so that the original social justice can be restored. Ramona Brant was sentenced to life-long imprisonment on the charge of conspiracy to possess and distribute cocaine. Despite the fact she had no previous criminal offenses and is a mother of two, she had to spend 21 years of her life time behind bars simply because of being in relationship with an abusive boyfriend. Her children will have to grow up in a family with both parents in prison. Under Sessions, the wrongdoers are being punished for more than what they have done wrong, creating a new form of social injustice. This is not the justice that the society should pursue.

In conclusion, people empower the government to rule in the belief that the government will pursue social equality and justice on their behalf. This is the foundation of a democratic government, and this is what the nation is built on. When the government fails to address the social issues and no longer seeks to fix them, it fails its people. Jeff Sessions' war on drugs triggers a warning on furthering social injustice and inequality. A better way for Jeff Sessions to promote public safety is to examine the local conditions that affects the crime rates, such as gun control and policing strategies. This will be a more optimal way of punishing wrongdoers.

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